

Radicals vs. Conservatives

The American Revolution was far more than a war between the colonies and Great Britain; it was also a struggle between those who enjoyed political privileges and those who did not. Yet the conclusions which may be drawn from the history of social conflict within the colonies and applied to such matters of mutual concern as the writing of a common constitution are seldom drawn and applied. Ordinarily the Revolution is treated as the end of one age and the beginning of another; a new country was born; political parties sprang into being: political leaders, full of wisdom, learned during the Revolution, sought to save the new nation from the results of ignorance and inexperience. So runs the story.

But the story is true only in an external sense. The basic social forces in colonial life were not eliminated by the Declaration of Independence. There was no break in the underlying conflict between party and party representing fundamental divisions in American society. Those divisions had their roots in the very foundation of the colonies, and by the middle of the eighteenth century there had arisen broad social groupings based on economic and political conditions. More and more, wealth and political power were concentrated along the coast, in the hands of planters in the South and of merchants in the North. There were exceptions, of course, but by and large the colonial governments were in the hands of the economic upper classes. Exceedingly conscious of its local rights, the ruling aristocracy was willing to use democratic arguments to defeat the centralizing policies of Great Britain, but it had no intention of widening the base of political power within the colonies to accord with the conclusions which could be, and were, drawn from those

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arguments. On the contrary, it had kept itself in power through the use of a number of political weapons. As wealth accumulated and concentrated along the coast, as the frontier moved westward and became debtor and alien in character, and as the propertyless element in the colonial towns grew larger, the owners of property demanded "a political interpretation of their favored position"—that is, political supremacy—as a protection against the economic programs of debtor agrarians and the town poor. Encouraged by the British government, they gradually secured the political safeguards they demanded—property qualifications for participation in government and representation disproportionate to their numbers. The imposition of property qualifications for the suffrage and of even higher qualifications for office effectively quelled the political ambitions of the greater part of the town population, and the denial of proportional representation to the newly settled areas prevented the growing West from capturing control of colonial governments. Laws of entail and primogeniture insured the economic basis of colonial society, so much so that Thomas Jefferson believed that their abolition in Virginia would annul the privileges of an "aristocracy of wealth."

But the economic-political aristocracy which Jefferson hoped to abolish had not always been characteristic of the American colonies. In early Virginia and Maryland every free man, whether holding property or not, could vote. The first serious attempt to impose a property qualification for the suffrage came with the Restoration and it met with bitter opposition. One of the significant acts of Bacon's Assembly in 1676 was the abolition of the property qualification imposed by the Berkeley regime. But the victory of the poorer elements was short-lived at best, and in Virginia, as elsewhere in the colonies by the end of the seventeenth century, the property qualification was an integral part of the political system. During the eighteenth century the tendency was in the direction of ever higher qualifications, and colonial assemblies continued to refuse adequate representation to the expanding West. By the middle of the century a small minority of the colonial population wielded economic and political powers which could not be taken from them by any legal means. This political oligarchy was able to ignore most of the popular demands, and when smoldering discontent did occasionally flare up in a violent outburst, it was forcibly suppressed. Thus democracy was decreasingly a characteristic of constitutional development in the American colonies.

Opposition to the oligarchical rule of the planters and merchants came from the agrarian and proletarian elements which formed the vast majority of the colonial population. Probably most of them were politically inert, but from their ranks nevertheless came some of the effective leadership and much of the support for revolutionary activity after 1763. In the towns the poorer people, although a small part of the colonial population, far outnumbered the large property-owners. Most of them—laborers, artisans, and small tradesmen—were dependent on the wealthy merchants, who ruled them economically and socially. Agrarian discontent, too, was the product of local developments:

of exploitation by land speculators, "taxation without representation," and the denial of political privileges, economic benefits, and military assistance. The farmer's desire for internal revolution had already been violently expressed in Bacon's Rebellion and in the Regulator Movement, events widely separated in time but similar in cause and consequence.

To a large extent, then, the party of colonial radicalism was composed of the masses in the towns and on the frontier. In Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston the radical parties were the foundation of the revolutionary movement in their towns and colonies.¹ It was they who provided the organization for uniting the dispersed farming population, which had not the means of organizing, but which was more than ready to act and which became the bulwark of the Revolution once it had started. Located at the center of things, the town radicals were able to seize upon issues as they arose and to spread propaganda by means of circular letters, committees of correspondence, and provincial congresses. They brought to a focus forces that would otherwise have spent themselves in sporadic outbursts easily suppressed by the established order.

Colonial radicalism did not become effective until after the French and Indian War. Then, fostered by economic depression and aided by the bumbling policy of Great Britain and the desire of the local governing classes for independence within the empire, it became united in an effort to throw off its local and international bonds. The discontented were given an opportunity to express their discontent when the British government began to enforce restrictions upon the colonies after 1763. The colonial merchants used popular demonstrations to give point to their more orderly protests against such measures as the Stamp Act, and it was only a step from such riots, incited and controlled by the merchants, to the organization of radical parties bent on the redress of local grievances which were of far more concern to the masses than the more remote and less obvious effects of British policy. Furthermore, there arose, in each of the colonies, leaders of more than ordinary ability, men who were able to create issues when none were furnished by Great Britain, and

¹ The terms "radical" and "conservative" in this discussion are not synonymous with "revolutionist" and "loyalist." That they are not interchangeable is obvious from the easily demonstrable fact that there were in internal colonial politics radicals who became loyalists, and conservatives who became revolutionists.

The interpretation of the Revolution is too often confused by the insistence that all revolutionists were radicals. Probably most radicals were revolutionists, but a large number of revolutionists were not radicals. The conservatives were those who—whether they desired independence or not—wanted to maintain the aristocratic order in the American colonies and states. The radicals were those who wanted changes in the existing order, changes which can be best described as democratic, though the term is necessarily relative.

By and large the majority of the colonial aristocracy was opposed to independence. This attitude was due partly to training, partly to self-interest, and partly—increasingly after 1774—to the fear that independence would result in an internal revolution. The radicals, on the other hand, shifted from mere opposition to British measures to a demand for independence as they came to realize that only independence would make possible the internal revolution which radicalism in the colonies had come more and more to demand.

who seized on British acts as heaven-sent opportunities to attack the local aristocracy—too strongly entrenched to be overthrown on purely local issues—under the guise of a patriotic defense of American liberties. Thus, used as tools at first, the masses were soon united under capable leadership in what became as much a war against the colonial aristocracy as a war for independence.

The American Revolution thus marks the ascendancy of the radicals of the colonies, for the first time effectively united. True, this radical ascendancy was of brief duration, but while it lasted an attempt was made to write democratic ideals and theories of government into the laws and constitutions of the American states. Fulfillment was not complete, for the past was strong and in some states the conservatives retained their power and even strengthened it. And once independence was won, the conservatives soon united in undoing, so far as they could, such political and economic democracy as had resulted from the war. Nevertheless it is significant that the attempt at democratization was made and that it was born of colonial conditions. The participation of the radicals in the creation of a common government is all-important, for they as well as the conservatives believed that a centralized government was essential to the maintenance of conservative rule. Naturally the radicals who exercised so much power in 1776 refused to set up in the Articles of Confederation a government which would guarantee the position of the conservative interests they sought to remove from power.

The conservatives gradually became aware that internal revolution might be the result of continued disputes between themselves and Great Britain, but they were not agreed on the measures necessary to retain both "home rule" and the power to "rule at home." Some of them, like Joseph Galloway, sought to tighten the bonds between the colonies and the mother country and thus to consolidate the power and bulwark the position of the colonial aristocracy. Other conservatives, like John Dickinson, denied that Parliament had any authority over the colonies and cared little for a close tie with the mother country; what they demanded was a status that was in effect home rule within the British Empire. Complete independence was to be avoided if possible, for it was fraught with the danger of social revolution within the colonies. As these men became aware that conservative rule had as much or more to fear from the people of the colonies as from British restrictions, they sought more and more for reconciliation with the mother country, in spite of her obvious intention to enforce her laws by means of arms. But they made the fatal yet unavoidable error of uniting with the radicals in meeting force with force. They made themselves believe that it was neither traitorous nor illegal to resist with arms the British measures they disliked.

When independence could no longer be delayed, the conservatives were forced to choose between England and the United States. Some became "Tories," or "Loyalists." Others, the victims of circumstances partly of their own creation, fearfully and reluctantly became revolutionists. But in so doing

they did not throw away their ideals of government. They were too cool, too well versed in checkmating radicalism and in administering governments in their own interest, to be misled by the democratic propaganda of the radicals. Not even John Adams, one of the few conservatives who worked for independence, was willing to stomach the ideas of Tom Paine when it came to the task of forming governments within the American colonies.

The continued presence of groups of conservatives in all the states, weakened though they were by the Revolution, is of profound importance in the constitutional history of the United States. They appeared in strength in the first Continental Congress. In it their ideas and desires were expressed. They were still powerful at the beginning of the second Continental Congress, but gradually their hold was weakened by the growing revolutionary movement in the various states. They were strong enough, however, to obstruct the radical program during 1775 and to delay a declaration of independence in 1776 until long after the radicals believed that independence was an accomplished fact. In the bitter controversies which occurred the conservatives stated their ideas of government. In its simplest form their objection to independence was that it involved internal revolution. When forced to accept independence, they demanded the creation of a central government which would be a bulwark against internal revolution, which would aid the merchant classes, which would control Western lands, which would, in short, be a "national" government. In this they were opposed by the radicals, who created a "federal" government in the Articles of Confederation and who resisted the efforts of the conservatives to shape the character of those Articles while they were in process of writing and ratification.

It is against such a background of internal conflict that the Articles of Confederation must be considered. Naturally any statement of the issues or principles of the Revolution, however broad the terminology, is likely to be misleading, for, as John Adams wrote, "the principles of the American Revolution may be said to have been as various as the thirteen states that went through it, and in some sense almost as diversified as the individuals who acted in it." There are inconsistencies and contradictions that cannot be forced into a logical pattern. Generalizations must therefore be understood as statements of tendencies and of presumed predominance rather than as unexceptionable statements of fact. Thus when the Revolution is interpreted in the following pages as predominantly an internal revolution carried on by the masses of the people against the local aristocracy, it is not without recognition of the fact that there were aristocratic revolutionists and proletarian loyalists; that probably the majority of the people were more or less indifferent to what was taking place; and that British policy after 1763 drove many conservatives into a war for independence.

Any interpretation of the American Revolution is subject to such qualifications, discomfiting as it is to those who want complexities reduced to simple formulas. Any collection of facts must, however, be grouped around a

theme, and particularly is this true of a movement having so many aspects as the American Revolution. Such grouping is unavoidable if one seeks to understand how the course of events, how the course of social revolution within the several states, often played a far more important role in determining political attitudes than did the more remote dangers of British policy.

In spite of the paradoxes involved one may still maintain that the Revolution was essentially, though relatively, a democratic movement within the thirteen American colonies, and that its significance for the political and constitutional history of the United States lay in its tendency to elevate the political and economic status of the majority of the people. The Articles of Confederation were the constitutional expression of this movement and the embodiment in governmental form of the philosophy of the Declaration of Independence.

The Internal Revolution

The Articles of Confederation were written by men many of whom rose to leadership as a result of the tempestuous local political battles fought in the years before the Revolution. Most of these new leaders gained power because they voiced the animosities and thus won the support of the discontented—the masses in the towns and the farmers of the back country—who in most of the states won the right to express themselves politically, or were able to force concessions where the conservative element remained in control of the new governments created.

When it came to the formation of a common government for all the states, the radicals were guided by experience and by certain political ideas. Experience had taught them to dislike the colonial governing classes and to fear the concentration of wealth and political power. Their political philosophy taught that governments exercising power over wide areas were inherently undemocratic in action. This distrust of the concentration and centralization of unchecked political authority was deepened by the fact that most of the revolutionary leaders were essentially local leaders whom necessity had forced into an international movement for independence but who continued to be guided and controlled by the exigencies of local politics. It is necessary, therefore, to turn to the revolutionary history of the individual colonies for an explanation of the many exceptions one must make to any generalizations regarding the revolutionary movement as a whole and the constitution it produced.

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Pennsylvania offers the clearest illustration of some of the basic issues upon which the course of the American Revolution turned. In no other colony were the racial-political-economic lines so sharply drawn, nowhere was the ruling class so opposed to change or to concession, and nowhere was the political revolution so complete in 1776.

As the colony had grown in wealth and population, political control had been retained by the three old counties of Philadelphia, Bucks, and Chester, and the city of Philadelphia. By the middle of the century an oligarchy of Quaker merchants and lawyers was dictating most of the policies of government. Their instrument was the colonial assembly, control of which they retained by denying representation to the ever-growing west. Even when new counties were created, they were made so vast in extent and were allotted so few representatives in the Assembly that the rule of the east was never endangered. In the east itself the masses were prevented from threatening oligarchical rule by suffrage laws which excluded all but a small minority of the population. The right to vote was contingent upon the possession of fifty pounds in personal property or a freehold. Neither was easy to secure, at least in the east. In Philadelphia in 1775 only 335 of 3,452 taxable males had estates large enough to give them the vote.

Opposition to the oligarchy was centered in the Susquehanna Valley and in the city of Philadelphia. The Susquehanna Valley, peopled largely by Scotch-Irish and Germans, was separated from the east by geography, by economic interest, by race, and by religion. Its natural market was the city of Baltimore, which very early improved roads to attract the trade of its northern neighbors, while the Pennsylvania Assembly refused to build roads or in any way to tie the west to the east.

Aside from racial and religious animosities, the grievances of the west against the east were very specific. It carried a burden of taxation without adequate representation, which in 1771, when an excise tax on hard liquor was instituted, was opposed in a manner prophetic of the later Whiskey Rebellion. The Presbyterian Scotch-Irish were driven to desperation by the refusal of the Quaker Assembly to aid them in their ever-continuing war with the Indians. The Proclamation line of 1763, which threatened to dispossess many westerners of lands already settled, was blamed on the Quakers. The pacifism of the Quaker merchants enraged frontiersmen, who suspected them of being moved more by a desire to maintain the fur trade than by humanitarian concern over the fate of the Indians.

The western farmer could meet the eastern merchant on terms of approximate equality only if he could secure adequate representation in the Assembly. This too was the demand of the populace of Philadelphia, where government was in the hands of the same wealthy class as controlled the colony. The sources of urban discontent were even more immediate than those of the west. All through the century the merchants had tried by various means to overthrow the system of markets and auctions in order to get a monopoly of the retail trade. Finally, in 1771, they devised a scheme which led to the most startling outburst of popular feeling that occurred before the Revolution. They agreed among themselves to buy from none but vendue masters who would agree to sell in large quantities. It was obvious that to continue in business the vendue masters would have to meet the demands of the big

merchants. It was equally obvious that the poor could not afford to buy in large quantities and would thus be forced to buy from the merchants, who had long shown a disposition to take a more than "reasonable" profit in fixing retail prices. The merchants likewise tried to check the activity of wandering peddlers. Fishing rights in the navigable rivers were restricted, a measure which the poor felt to be aimed directly at them. In the face of such events it was natural that the lawyer-agents of the merchants should be bitterly attacked by the masses of the population.

The attempt of the Quaker element in the east to convert Pennsylvania from a proprietary into a crown colony was fought bitterly by the Presbyterians in both east and west. Though they had none too great a love for the Penn family, they knew full well that the creation of a crown colony would place them entirely at the mercy of the oligarchy. In this struggle John Dickinson led the proprietary party, which had the support of the west. Franklin, who, oddly enough, has since acquired a reputation as a democrat, was the agent of the oligarchy in England. A future loyalist, Joseph Galloway, led its forces in the Pennsylvania Assembly.

British policy was at once the occasion and the excuse for action in Pennsylvania. As in the other colonies, the propertied classes were strongly opposed to any acts of Parliament infringing upon their local independence or interfering with the profits of trade. But the arguments they advanced in support of their rights were a double-edged weapon that cut in favor of the unrepresented classes as well as colonial self-government. By 1755 the oligarchy began to realize that it was caught between the hammer and the anvil. This became increasingly clear as a revolutionary organization was developed wherein the old restrictions on the franchise and county representation no longer held. The creation of a provincial congress gave the west a dominance in the colony and deprived the three old counties of the hold they had had over the majority of the others. Yet the old Assembly continued to meet and to refuse concessions that would have weakened the radical program and enabled the Assembly to assume the leadership itself. By thus refusing either to lead or to guide, the conservative party was thrown from power in June, 1776. The radical party, temporarily unhampered, was able to write the most democratic constitution any American state has ever had.

The conservatives, led by James Wilson, Robert Morris, John Dickinson, and others, opposed the new order so bitterly that they very nearly wrecked the government of the state and did in fact render it largely ineffective in fighting the Revolution. The unicameral legislature, which they had considered satisfactory so long as it had been in their own control, they now criticized as the worst of all possible forms of government. Their proposal of a system of "checks and balances" as the remedy for all political ills was a thin disguise for their desire to regain control of the state. By 1779 they had made some political gains, but since they were a minority their control of a democratic government was bound to be precarious. Recognizing this to be

so, they turned more and more to "nationalism" in the hope of gaining power and protection in another political sphere. They became more and more insistent upon the creation of a "national" government. Their program involved strengthening the Articles of Confederation, but when this failed they participated in a conservative political revolution which ignored the legal methods of constitutional change and created a government in harmony with conservative ideas and experience. . . .

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The calling of the first Continental Congress wrought a fundamental change in the growing revolutionary movement. No longer were the scattered revolutionary forces, feeding upon the vacillations of British policy and the exigencies of local politics, the center of the movement. When Congress outlined general policies which achieved the status of law as a result of popular support, it took the lead in the Revolution, although its effectiveness as a revolutionary organization was determined ultimately by the political character of the state organizations sending delegates to it. As the local radical parties gained power and sent radicals to Congress, it changed its policies. The history of those changing policies is the history of the outbreak of the American Revolution.

